

NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUND NO. 5-6018
FRED BROWN/NEW DELHI

JULY 21, 1978

HARNESSING THE MONSOON

ANNCR:

IN THE COUNTRIES OF SOUTH ASIA, THE MONSOON SEASON HAS REACHED ITS PEAK. LARGE AREAS OF INDIA, PAKISTAN, AND NEPAL ARE BEING RAVAGED BY FLOOD. FROM OUR SOUTH ASIA BUREAU, CORRESPONDENT FRED BROWN DISCUSSES THE VARYING WAYS OF LOOKING AT THIS ANNUAL PHENOMENON.

VOICE:

"GANGES ON THE RAMPAGE"... "BRAHMAPUTRA INUNDATES MANY AREAS IN BIHAR".... "FIVE HUNDRED YEAR OLD TEMPLE WASHING AWAY".... THESE WERE SOME OF THE HEADLINES IN INDIAN NEWSPAPERS WEDNESDAY. IT'S AN ALL TOO FAMILIAR STORY IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD, WHERE THE CAPRICIOUS CHARACTER OF NATURE IS VERY WELL KNOWN.

FOR THE PAST THREE YEARS, AND NOW APPARENTLY A FOURTH, THE MONSOON HAS BEEN GOOD TO THE COUNTRIES OF SOUTH ASIA, BRINGING RAIN IN ABUNDANCE AND ASSURING BOUNTIFUL CROPS. IN INDIA, ALL-TIME RECORD HARVESTS AND BULGING STORAGE WAREHOUSES HAVE ALL BUT ELIMINATED ANY THREAT OF STARVATION IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE.

BUT THEN, OF COURSE, THERE IS THE DARKER SIDE OF MONSOON -- THE HEAVY LOSS OF HUMAN LIFE EACH YEAR AND THE DEVASTATION. THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, MONSOON FLOODS IN INDIA HAVE DESTROYED AN AVERAGE OF SEVEN MILLION HECTARES OF LAND A YEAR, INCLUDING THREE MILLION HECTARES OF CROPS WORTH AN ESTIMATED TWO HUNDRED TWENTY-FIVE MILLION DOLLARS. THIS FIGURE DOES NOT INCLUDE INDIRECT COSTS DUE TO THE BREAKDOWN IN COMMUNICATIONS AND

ESSENTIAL SERVICES, AND LARGE EXPENDITURES FOR RELIEF. OTHER COST SUCH AS SILTATION DAMAGE TO RIVER NAVIGATION AND PORTS HASN'T EVEN BEEN CALCULATED.

ONE OF THE MAJOR IRONIES OF THIS SITUATION IS THAT THE FLOOD WATERS THAT ARE PRESENTLY CAUSING SO MUCH HAVOC COULD BE USED TO GREAT ADVANTAGE BY FARMERS LATER IN THE YEARS WHEN THE RAINS HAVE STOPPED AND THE GROUND ONCE AGAIN BECOMES PARCHED AND LIFELESS.

EXPERTS LONG HAVE ARGUED THAT IT IS WELL WITHIN THE COMPETENCE OF MAN TO CONTROL THE MONSOON. AS A STARTER, SATELLITES HAVE BEEN USED TO PROVIDE A MORE EFFICIENT EARLY WARNING SYSTEM. THIS WOULD HELP SOLVE THE MORE IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS OF SAVING LIFE. BUT FROM THE LONG RANGE STANDPOINT, SAY THE EXPERTS, DAMS AND RESERVOIRS ARE NEEDED TO STORE THE EXCESS WATER AND CANALS TO DISTRIBUTE IT LATER DURING THE DRY SEASON. OTHER MEASURES SUCH AS REFORESTATION ALSO ARE NEEDED TO HALT THE EROSION AT THE SOURCES OF THE RIVERS THAT CAUSE THE SILTATION PROBLEMS DOWNSTREAM.

BUT SUCH MEASURES MUST BE TACKLED, THE EXPERTS SAY, IF MEN ARE TO TURN TODAY'S WATERS OF SORROW INTO TOMORROW'S WATERS OF HOPE.

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JS/RTD